

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

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## **BREAKING: UpRiver Summit offers inspiration and practical advice to entrepreneurs**



B.K. Fulton (left), whose business ventures now include Soulidify Productions, is interviewed during the summit by Mickey Quiñones, dean of the University of Richmond's Robins School of Business

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Local entrepreneurs and startup founders got a dose of inspiration as well as practical advice on how to connect with bigger companies at Wednesday's UpRiver Summit in Richmond.

More than 300 people attended the second annual UpRiver Summit, an all-day event at the Bon Secours Washington Redskins Training Center focusing on the Richmond region's entrepreneurial environment.

"At the end of the day, I am amazed at how ripe Richmond is and Virginia is for this leap forward," said B.K. Fulton, a former executive with Verizon Communications, AOL Time Warner and the National Urban League whose numerous business ventures now include Soulidifly Productions, a filmmaking and publishing company founded in 2017.

Fulton said he sees his venture into filmmaking and publishing as a way to "ignite that spark in other people in the way it was ignited in me."

A self-described poor student in his first years at Virginia Tech, Fulton said he had a transformative experience after he came across biographies in the library about accomplished black Americans he had not heard of, such as the 19th-century inventor Lewis Howard Latimer.

"If reading about the accomplishments of women and minorities could propel me in this crazy career I have had, then imagine if I put it on the big screen," said Fulton, who was interviewed during the event by Mickey Quiñones, dean of the University of Richmond's Robins School of Business.

"I don't know where the cure from cancer is coming from," he said. "I don't know where the cure for ALS is coming from. I don't know where the next big thing is coming from. Some of it is in this room, so I say invest in everybody," Fulton said.

Fulton urged prospective entrepreneurs to "reach out and find the folk that are willing to help you — they are out there."

Attendees at the event also heard from representatives of three large corporations in Virginia that have invested in startups or in organizations that help startups.

They were Blake Luse, director of Ferguson Ventures, a strategic venture arm for Newport News-based Ferguson Enterprises, a major U.S. distributor of plumbing, HVAC and industrial products; Clark Farrey, senior director of innovation for Markel Corp., an insurer that has an investment division, Markel Ventures; and Toria Edmonds-Howell, community engagement manager for the 1717 Innovation Center in Richmond, which is backed by financial services giant Capital One Financial Corp.

All three said their companies have a vested interest in backing a vibrant entrepreneurial environment because their businesses depend on economic development in the state.

A key challenge for the larger companies is being able to connect with startup businesses that can offer solutions to the problems that the big companies are facing, Luse and Farrey said.

Edmonds-Howell said one of the major challenges is how to make sure resources are available to everyone in the region's diverse and broad talent pool.

"What I would say we all need to work on is really thinking through who has not been invited to the feast, who isn't part of the ecosystem and how we can make sure they are able to access this rich environment," she said.